

Review of:

The Potlikker Papers: A Food History of the Modern South.

John T. Edge. New York: Penguin Press, 2017. Pp. 370, selected bibliography, index.

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The Potlikker Papers: A Food History of the Modern South bills itself as a people's history of the modern U.S. South told through food. Rather than strive for an encyclopedic chronology, John T. Edge describes the structure as "an album of snapshots" or "a menu of dishes" to describe the vignettes of people, place, and food woven together to paint a complex picture of the South (3).

Bookended by a foreword that honors the late John Egerton and an afterword that centers Southerners' shared palette amid ongoing regional problems, *Potlikker Papers* consists of an introduction followed by five parts, each covering a two-decade time period. In the introduction, Edge argues that "food narratives illumine history," making the case for an understanding of food culture in the U.S. South that traces political movements, economic shifts, social ideals, and, above all, the people cooking, eating, and connecting over Southern cuisine (7).

In part one, "Freedom Struggles (1950s-1970s)," Edge explores the South during the Civil Rights Movement. Chapter One, "Kitchen Tables," describes the Black women who fed protesters as grassroots conversations took place in their kitchens and clubhouses. Chapter Two, "Restaurant Theaters," details the painful performances of Black waitstaff serving segregated white restaurants as well as those restaurants' resistance to federally ordered integration. Chapter Three, "Poor Power," addresses both the Johnson administration's "national war on poverty" (54) and community-led efforts to feed Black Southerners, such as Fannie Lou Hamer's Freedom Farm. And Chapter Four, "Black Power," focuses on Southern Black nationalists' post-segregation efforts to obtain farmland, develop Black-owned co-ops, and uplift black restauranteurs.

Part two, "Rise of the Folk (1970s & 1980s)," describes the rebranding and exportation of Southern culture post-Civil Rights. Chapter Five, "Landed Hippies," examines hippies from across the U.S. who established countercultural communes in the South's arable land. Chapter Six, "Faster Food," chronicles Southern fast-food restaurants' efforts to popularize and export Southern cooking across the country. Chapter Seven, "Carter Country," discusses how Carter's rise to the U.S. presidency impacted national attitudes toward Southern music, accents, and cuisine. And Chapter Eight, "Black Pastorals," describes Edna Lewis' recentering of poor Southern Black food through her philosophy of cooking as an "act of recollection" requiring connection to the land and its seasons (154).

In part three, "Gentrification (1980s & 1990s)," Edge engages the impact of increasing wealth and urbanization on Southern food culture. Chapter Nine, "Kingmaker and Kings," tells of *New York Times* food editor and restaurant critic Craig Claiborne's popularization of Southern chefs and cuisines. Chapter Ten, "Generation Grits," navigates the debate between gourmet food and regional dishes within Southern restaurant cuisine. And Chapter Eleven,

“Cooking School,” details Nathalie Dupree’s influence on yet another renaissance of Southern cuisine.

Part four, “New Respect (1990-2010s),” covers the artisanal renaissance that has reconnected Southern farmers and cooks in recent decades. Chapter Twelve, “Artisanal Pantry,” details a return to craft production of grits, ham, moonshine, and more. Chapter Thirteen, “Restaurant Renaissance,” describes the revival of restaurants both high-end and down-home. And Chapter Fourteen, “Pits and Pitmasters,” honors barbecue’s emergence as a “national folk food” (264) and celebrates white and black pitmasters alike.

Finally, in part five, “Future Tenses (2010s Forward),” Edge looks to the present and the horizon. Chapter Fifteen, “Political Reckonings,” addresses present-day efforts to reckon with the South’s history of slavery and dispossession, from Michael Twitty’s response to the Paula Deen controversy to organizing for migrant farmworker rights. Chapter Sixteen, “Nuevo Sud,” recognizes Southern food as “the original fusion cuisine” (294) and celebrates indigenous, Black, and migrant culinary “creolizations,” both historic and current (300).

Potlikker Papers presents a rich history of a complex region. Edge succeeds in making the compelling case for food as an appropriate and illuminative entry point into the intertwined political, economic, and social dynamics continually being renegotiated in the U.S. South. In doing so, Edge gracefully embraces the tensions and contradictions of the region. One tension throughout *Potlikker Papers* is the desire to understand the South as a cohesive region, particularly in light of the recent renaissance Edge describes. Edge is not entirely successful in this aim, in part because his writing thrives in particularities—of people, foods, histories, and regions—that challenge sweeping statements about the South or Southerners as a whole.

Certain sections, such as Edge’s discussions of the impacts of gentrification and the cultural impact of landed hippies, merit a more critical or at least more nuanced perspective such as that given to Edge’s portrayal of post-Katrina New Orleans. For example, to conclude part three, “Gentrification (1980s & 1990s),” Edge states that gentrification, while often recognized as a “negative cultural force,” “had some positive effects” in helping the South gain broad consideration and respect (212). In a section that focuses almost entirely on white Southerners’ efforts to gentrify and “revive” Southern food culture, a deeper focus on the people displaced and dispossessed in the process would have offered a more complete picture, though Edge does delve more pointedly into these themes in the book’s later chapters.

Additionally, more information about methodology would have enriched *Potlikker Papers*. Edge sets out to write a “people’s history” of the South, and, certainly, a plethora of people grace its pages. Yet many of the book’s characters are renowned chefs, restaurant owners, cookbook authors, and food magazine editors. Edge might have offered information about how certain people, stories, and themes were chosen as representative of each era, and which people or foods had been erased from the archives, relegated to anonymity.

Potlikker Papers is an important read for food scholars, but also scholars interested in tracing the political through the quotidian and for anyone searching for a nuanced window into political, cultural, and social elements of the U.S. South. Above all, Edge's work offers a beautiful tribute to a complex and changing region as its people continue to grapple with its history, future, and identity.